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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 FRANKFURT 008965

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/AGS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/14/2015

TAGS: PHUM PTER KISL KPAO GM

SUBJECT: GULF BETWEEN KEY MUSLIM ORGANIZATION AND HESSE
STATE GOVERNMENT HIGHLIGHTS INTEGRATION CHALLENGE

Classified By: Consul General Peter Bodde for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Tensions between the Hesse state government and the IRH (Islamische Religionsgemeinschaft Hessen, the state's largest Muslim umbrella organization) have simmered since the state listed the IRH in its annual report on extremism. The dispute came to the forefront again at IRH's high-profile Iftaar dinner, when IRH Chairman Ramazan Kuruyuez again threatened to leave Germany. Despite Minister-President Koch's efforts to improve ties to prominent Muslims, integration in the state is hampered by a fragmented Muslim community and by political disagreement on how best to approach the issue. END SUMMARY.

IRH: Background

2. (U) The roughly 300,000 Muslims living in Hesse are politically and socially fragmented, lacking a clear and organized voice in their interactions with the state. As the largest Muslim organization in the state, the IRH has sought to fill this role and considers itself the leading Muslim organization in Hesse (a claim rejected by some government representatives who say that the IRH cannot speak for all Muslims). Established in 1997, the IRH claims 12,000 members (mostly Turkish). Unlike most Muslim organizations, seventy percent of IRH executive board members have German citizenship. IRH's stated goals include integrating Muslims into German society, Islamic religious education in public schools, the free practice of Islam, intercultural dialogue, and promoting the interests of Muslims in Hesse.

Strained Relations

3. (SBU) During the past year, tensions have arisen between the Hesse state government and the IRH. The major point of contention is IRH's listing as an extremist organization in the 2004 report by the Hesse State Office for the Protection of the Constitution (LfV, which tracks domestic extremists; report available at <http://www.verfassungsschutz-hessen.de/download/vsbericht2004.pdf>). The Hesse Interior Ministry (which coordinates the report) says that the IRH advocates introducing Shariah law in Germany and maintains ties to organizations and individuals who oppose the German constitution. The IRH challenged the report in court. Ministry contacts have confided that IRH's ties to the listed organization Milli Goerues (IGMG) were a main factor in listing IRH as extremist (although that is not specifically stated in the report itself). IGMG itself purports to be the largest Turkish organization in Germany (membership estimates vary widely), while a recent report cosponsored by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution characterizes the group as the largest radical "Islamicist" organization in Germany with 26,000 members. IRH does not deny that some of its members are also belong to Milli Goerues, but claims the IGMG faction is marginal and that IGMG's extremist tendencies are "grossly exaggerated."

4. (U) IRH also failed to convince Hesse to establish Islamic religious instruction in public schools (as recently introduced in neighboring Baden-Wuerttemberg). Hesse State Education Minister Karin Wolff (CDU) rejected the IRH-proposed curriculum as not representative of the diverse Muslim community in Hesse. She also pointed to optional ethics courses that Muslim students can take in lieu of Christian religious instruction. The IRH appealed the Ministry of Education's decision and continues to work on the issue. Boggled down in multiple and expensive court proceedings, Chairman and founder Ramazan Kuruyuez first announced in June 2005 that he would leave Germany in protest.

Mixed Messages, Mixed Reactions

5. (U) The IRH Iftaar dinner underscored the IRH's mixed messages and varied reactions from mainstream politicians (Social Democrat, Green Party, and Free Democrat state caucus chiefs attended, while Christian Democrats were noticeably absent). During his hour-long speech, Kuruyuez condemned the

Iranian president's remarks on Israel as "irresponsible" and intolerable, noting that "Israel has the right to exist as a state." He condemned "all terrorist acts" and said the IRH would "fight all hate preachers" and would not tolerate anti-Semitism. Kuruyuez expressed hope that Turkey could play a role in normalizing relations between the west and the Islamic world, calling the EU to apply the same membership criteria to Turkey that apply to all other applicants. At the same time, Kuruyuez made thinly-veiled criticisms of the United States and the West, decrying "unjust wars" and the use of violence to spread democracy. Kuruyuez again called on Hesse Minister-President Roland Koch (CDU) to personally intervene and take the IRH off the LfV watch list. In exchange, Kuruyuez pledged to leave Germany to avoid "standing in the way of a normalization of relations" between the IRH and the Hesse government. Some of the approximately 150 guests at the Iftaar expressed unease with Kuruyuez's remarks, some leaving the event following the speech and others evincing disagreement.

16. (C) Politicians and state officials are divided in their assessments of IRH. SPD Caucus Chief Juergen Walter said publicly that by ostracizing the IRH, the state is severing its last remaining channel of communication with Muslims in Hessen. Others, including Greens State Caucus Chief Tarek Al-Wazir (who is of Yemeni descent), privately expressed frustration with Kuruyuez's grandstanding. Helga Nagel, head of the Frankfurt Office for Multicultural Affairs, characterized the speech as counterproductive and opined that playing the role of victim does not advance the IRH's cause. Hesse state government representatives later told us they question the IRH's sincerity and motives, moderate public statements notwithstanding. Frankfurt officials active on the issue echoed this sentiment, reporting that despite its calls for open-mindedness and inter-religious dialogue, the IRH remains a conservative Islamic organization rather than a modernizing force. Hesse Interior State Secretary Oda Scheibelhuber (CDU) downplayed the dispute, telling us that Kuruyuez is angry in part because the state rejected his application for German citizenship.

COMMENT

17. (C) Kuruyuez is a key figure within the Muslim community in Hesse. His departure would probably do little to change the IRH's listing as an extremist organization and might further complicate the troubled dialogue between Muslims and the state (some observers consider his current deputy a hard-liner). Some IRH members and opposition politicians blame the current tension on the Koch administration's perceived hard line towards Muslims (raids on mosques and Muslim neighborhoods, the closure of some Muslim boarding schools, and Germany's strictest law on headscarves are all cited as evidence). In reality, Minister-President Koch has made strides towards integration and even served as keynote speaker at IRH events prior to its listing as extremist. Koch is a proponent of dialogue (more so than other conservative politicians in the state), but also faces increased security concerns and political constraints. Integration and dialogue are important considering Hesse's sizable foreign population (in Frankfurt, for example, one out of every four persons is foreign born). The stalled dialogue in Hesse underlines the complex challenges Germany faces in reaching out to a fragmented Muslim community while isolating extremists. END COMMENT.
BODDE